

ARNOLD ARBORETUM
HARVARD UNIVERSITY



FLOWERING TREES

BULLETIN
OF POPULAR INFORMATION

SERIES 4. VOL. VII

MAY 12, 1939

NUMBER 5

THE NORTH MEADOW

THE Jamaica Plain Gate is one of the most attractive approaches to the Arnold Arboretum in the first warm days of spring. The magnolias planted about the Administration Building, which stands just inside the gate, are among the earliest flowering shrubs to open their buds. They enjoy particularly good conditions here because, being mainly on the south side of the building, they are exposed directly to the warm sun; also they are protected from cold winds by the building and the hill behind it. About the same time the red maples on the opposite side of the road are opening their scarlet flowers, and the willows nearby are producing catkins.

It was decreed in the original plan of the Arboretum that the trees and shrubs should be arranged in a sequence which would conform to a commonly accepted view of their relationship. The scheme chosen was that of the great British botanists of the last century, Bentham and Hooker. Consequently, as one goes along the Meadow Road past the magnolias, he first finishes the Magnolia Family by passing their relatives, the tulip-trees, which grow on the hillside near the place where the bridle-path turns off. These trees do not flower until late May. Just to the south of the road and partly hidden by tall shrubbery is a grass path along which is a large planting of gooseberries and currants which flower attractively in May. The old-fashioned golden currant, *Ribes odoratum* is one of the most fragrant and most popular in this group.

Proceeding along the road one notes that it is on a low embankment, with wet meadow on the left and park-like expanse on the right. The embankment itself had been planted with *Cercidiphyllum*, *Phellodendron*, and *Evonymus* on the right, and with *Cercidiphyllum*, shad-

bushes, maples, buckthorns, and sumacs on the left. The *Cercidiphyllums* put forth their bluish-green leaves early, but these are preceded by a wealth of small flowers that have bright red stamens. Although of an unfamiliar sort, the *Cercidiphyllums* have a form more or less characteristic of our native deciduous trees. The *Phellodendrons*, on the other hand, possess an "awkward," unsupported branching form that is foreign to our usual eastern American concept of what a deciduous tree should look like.

The linden and horsechestnut collections are among the finest of their kind in America. They appear to be thriving in the low but fairly well-drained field which extends from the road westward to the wooded gravelly knolls nearby. In late May the horsechestnuts and buckeyes are covered with their upright, conical inflorescences, ranging from white or cream-color to deep pink and red.

Between the Meadow Road and the Arborway is a low swampy area which remains wet during a large part of the year. At its lower end, just across from the Administration Building, are the remnants of a once-large willow collection. Strangely enough many species have failed to do well here, chiefly because the water table has been at such a high level that even willows cannot survive! A row of tall willows along the Arborway fence had grown so large that its overhanging branches threatened traffic on the street. A part of these were removed in the winter of 1937-38, and the remainder were so severely damaged in the hurricane of September, 1938, that most of them were taken out last winter, leaving a few surviving veterans to be disposed of later. It is being replaced with a planting of red maples and tupelos whose brilliant red autumn color will eventually become one of the Arboretum's outstanding autumnal displays. On the opposite side of the low ground, northwest of the lindens and *Cercidiphyllums* is a curving grass path lined with honeysuckles and viburnums. Back of this is the bridle path, recently improved by the city from a mudhole to a well-drained roadway.

As in most of the Arboretum, the evidences of earlier history are here nearly all erased. Along the bridle path, and roughly bordering the property of the Adams Nervine hospital, is a row of tall ash trees (now badly damaged by the hurricane) which appear to have marked an old boundry of the low meadow. Although it is not now visible, one of the oldest surveyed lines in the town of Roxbury passes through this tract. When the original settlers in the town divided among themselves the lands in the outlying districts, they laid down a line, trending roughly northwest and southeast, as a base from which to

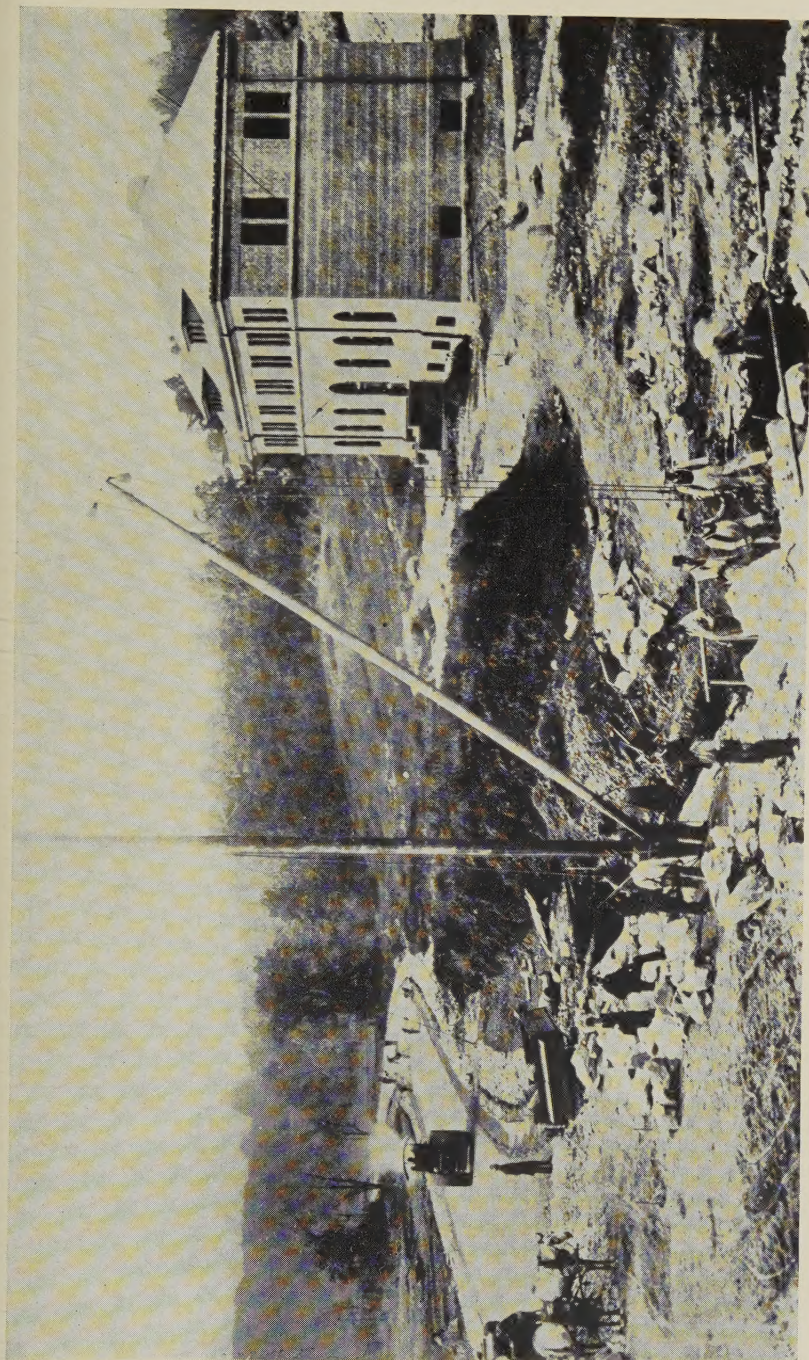
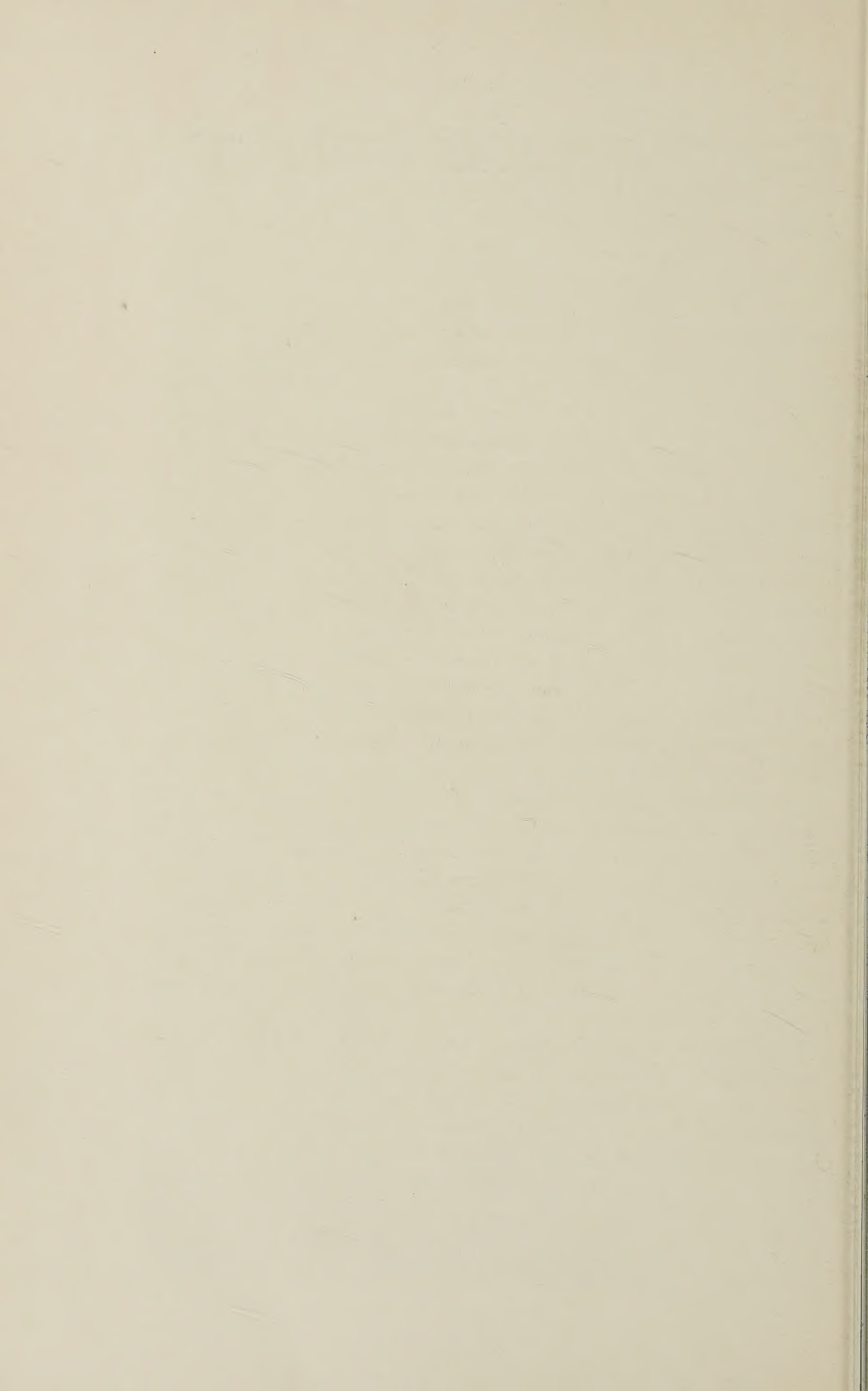


PLATE III

When the Arboretum was young. Picture taken at Jamaica Plain gate, 1890.



measure. This was known as the "headline of the first division," and in our area extended from a point among the shadbushes and *Cercidiphyllums* across the wet meadow and the Arborway so as to margin the westerly curb of Park Road. Farther over the hill the line marks the end boundary of the Bussey Institution grounds. This line was the northeast boundary of the original Arboretum. Later the present extensions of the tract to the Jamaica Plain Gate and to Centre Street were added by the city or by the University.

Most of the low ground, notably that west of the Meadow Road and the southerly half of the remainder, is mentioned in the oldest land records in Roxbury as "Gore's Meadow." It remained a meadow throughout its history to the time of the Arboretum plantations. As such it was in demand among the early settlers who had to have natural feed for their stock. Most of the countryside was originally wooded except, perhaps, for the low stream margins and swampy areas; and even when cleared, the production of forage in the dry hillside pastures was meager. Consequently the farmers used the coarse grasses and sedges of the natural meadows to good advantage, and utilized every means at their command to drain the wetter parts so that they could be used. The old maps of our wet meadow show the arrangement of these early drainage ditches, which were also the dividing lines between small parcels of land which were bought and sold separately. The part west of the road was evidently most in demand because it was higher and needed less artificial drainage. Parts of it changed hands twenty or more times during the first 200 years after the lands were granted.

The original vegetation can only be suggested. It was probably a grassy or sedgy meadow, for this term was used for it in the earliest land records. Nevertheless, at some early date it must have had a swampy forest, for cedar logs have been taken from excavations in the underlying peat. The only record we have that the peat was ever used for fuel is in a deed given by Eleazer Weld to one Daniel McCarthy in 1784, giving the latter the right "to cut Sufficient Turff for fuel for the Necessary Support of Two Families . . . so long as Turff can be cut on said . . . meadow land."

The Meadow Road was built by 1890, making possible the plantations on its borders soon after. The Arborway was completed in 1895, and its border plantation of willows was put in about that time. A small stream known as Goldsmith Brook, which rises in the hills west of Centre Street, formerly had a channel through the meadow. It was brought under partial control in 1892; and the lindens, horsechest-

nuts, and neighboring groups were planted in 1894. The arrangement did not prove satisfactory, however, and the brook was finally confined to an underground conduit in 1905. Drainage from the lower part of the meadow was somewhat improved in 1900 when the eastern sewer level was lowered between the Arborway and Stony Brook. It is still unsatisfactory, however, for the meadow is flooded at least once a year, often nearly to the level of the Meadow Road. Since nothing can be planted there, the weeds are allowed to grow rankly throughout the summer. Fortunately they are composed largely of wild asters, mints and goldenrods, which make a blaze of color in late summer and early autumn when the Arboretum is otherwise reduced to browns and dull greens.

These low grounds at the northeasterly end of the Arboretum have been difficult to make attractive. Nothing could be done at all until the water level was lowered by local ditching or by lowering the sewer barriers. The Meadow Road gave a mass of stable and well-drained soil which could be used for suitable border plantings. We owe a tribute to the foresight and sense of proportion which were shown by the founders of the Arboretum in laying out the plantings. They had to visualize as best they could the mass effects of trees and shrubs as they would appear 50 to 75 years after they were planted. That they accomplished an admirable task is evident on every hand in the Arboretum, and no more so anywhere than in the north meadow. But much remains to be desired in the low swamp across from the Administration Building. The variety of possible plantations will always be limited by the excessive peaty substratum. If the whole were to be filled up it would be necessary to open it as an unsightly dumping ground for a considerable period of years.

It has been suggested that a permanent pond for hardy water lilies might be established by excavating a portion of the peat bog and utilizing the excavated material for filling other parts of this area. This would add a very attractive feature to the meadow and should at the same time increase the area of higher land which might be used for permanent plantings.

This might be a feasible solution, for there is an abundance of water both from the brook which enters the lowland from a culvert just east of the building and from the old Goldsmith Brook. Both of these flow throughout the summer.

HUGH RAUP